



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

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Station Pea Island, North Carolina

USLSS Station #17, Sixth District
Coast Guard Station #177



Pea Island Lifeboat Station, 16 July 1917

Location: On beach, 6-7/8 miles south southeast of Oregon Inlet and 9 miles southeast by south of Bodie Island Light; 35° 43' 15" N x 75° 29' 30" W (circa 1939)

Date of Conveyance: 25 July 1878

Station Built: 1871; rebuilt 1896 & 1931

Fate: Decommissioned in 1947

Keepers:

George C. Daniels was the first Keeper appointed to Pea Island. He served until he was dismissed from the Service on 8 May 1880 after an official investigation into misconduct.

Richard Etheridge was appointed Keeper on 24 January 1880 and died while in service on 8 May 1900.

Benjamin J. Bowser was appointed on 11 June 1900 and died while in service on 2 September 1900.



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Lewis S. Wescott was appointed Keeper on 27 September 1900 and served until 1916.

Boatswain William H. Irving took over as Officer-in-Charge on 28 August 1916 and served until he retired in 1922.

Chief Boatswain's Mate George E. Pruden was appointed Officer-in-Charge in 1922 and served until 1 July 1936.

Chief Boatswain's Mate Maxie Berry, Sr., USCG, was appointed Officer-in-Charge on 1 July 1936 and served in that capacity until late-1943. BMC Berry was one of 22 members of his family that served their country in the U.S. Life-Saving Service and U.S. Coast Guard. Berry's father, Joseph H. Berry, joined the Life-Saving Service in 1897.

Chief Boatswain's Mate (a) Lonnie C. Gray served as the acting officer-in-charge at least as of 8 December 1943.

Historical Remarks:

The original site of the Pea Island Station was acquired by deed dated 25 July 1878 under provisions of the Act of Congress, approved 3 March 1875 and covered a tract of land containing 3 acres. The station constructed was an 1876-type boathouse designed by architect J. Lake Parkinson. That station was destroyed by fire on 29 May 1880 in a suspected case of arson but no one was ever prosecuted for setting it. The station was rebuilt later that year in time for the winter "inclement season."

Captain Richard Etheridge became the first African-American to command a Life-Saving station when the Service appointed him as the keeper of the Pea Island Life-Saving Station in North Carolina in 1880. The Revenue Cutter Service officer who recommended his appointment, First Lieutenant Charles F. Shoemaker, noted that Etheridge was "one of the best surfmen on this part of the coast of North Carolina." Soon after Etheridge's appointment, the station burned down. Determined to execute his duties with expert commitment, Etheridge supervised the construction of a new station on the original site. He also developed rigorous lifesaving drills that enabled his crew to tackle all lifesaving tasks. His station earned the reputation of "one of the tautest on the Carolina Coast," with its keeper well-known as one of the most courageous and ingenious lifesavers in the Service.

On 11 October 1896, Etheridge's rigorous training drills proved to be invaluable. The three-masted schooner, the *E.S. Newman*, was caught in a terrifying storm. En route from Providence, Rhode Island to Norfolk, Virginia, the vessel was blown 100 miles



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south off course and came ashore on the beach two miles south of the Pea Island station. The storm was so severe that Etheridge had suspended normal beach patrols that day. But the alert eyes of surfman Theodore Meekins saw the first distress flare and he immediately notified Etheridge. Etheridge gathered his crew and launched the surfboat. Battling the strong tide and sweeping currents, the dedicated lifesavers struggled to make their way to a point opposite the schooner, only to find there was no dry land. The daring, quick-witted Etheridge tied two of his strongest surfmen together and connected them to shore by a long line. They fought their way through the roaring breakers and finally reached the schooner. The seemingly inexhaustible Pea Island crewmembers journeyed through the perilous waters ten times and rescued the entire crew of the *E.S. Newman*. For this rescue the crew, including Etheridge, were recently awarded the Gold Lifesaving Medal by the Coast Guard.

By deed dated 11 June 1930 a new site containing 10 acres and more conveniently located, was acquired from the trustees of the Pea Island Club. The consideration for this conveyance was the formal abandonment of all the property on the island which had been used for lifesaving or Coast Guard purposes up to that time. Declarations of Abandonment of the site acquired in 1896 and the site and easement acquired in 1908, were executed and recorded. "New quarters" were authorized and built at a cost of "some \$30,000" and the previous station was abandoned.

The station was "disestablished" on 18 March 1947 but was not formally abandoned. A board of survey noted that the dimensions of the property were approximately 200 feet by 2,400 feet and that the land was owned by the U.S. Biological Survey and had been used by the Coast Guard under a "use and occupancy permit". In 1949 the Pea Island Station was turned over to the Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, for use in connection with the Pea Island Migratory Waterfowl Refuge.

The station's boathouse was removed in 1948 by contractor "Ferrebee" and moved to Oregon Inlet Lifeboat Station for use as a garage and repair shop. The Board of Survey recommended that the lookout tower be left in place and retained in service "to house present Coast Guard telephone Communication system outlet and to serve as occasions [sic] demand as shelter for use by Stations performing assistance work in this area."

The property was turned over to the General Services Administration when the station was decommissioned in 1949 and was used by the Fish and Wildlife Service until 1966. The station was then sold at auction.

The cookhouse of the second station was moved to Collins Park in Manteo, NC, in 2006 from Rodanthe where it had been relocated from its original location on an unspecified date.



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No official caption/date/photo number; photographer unknown.

Photograph of Richard Etheridge and the Pea Island Life-Saving crew in front of their station, circa 1890.



"[Station] 177 (Pea Island) 7-16-17, 7th Dist., Looking northwest."; dated 16 July 1917.
No photo number; photographer unknown.

The Pea Island Station as it appeared in 1917.



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Original caption: "The only all-colored surf station crew in the U.S. Coast Guard. Reading left to right, they are: Chief Boatswain's Mate George E. Pruden, in charge; Cleon C. Tillett, B.M.1c.; Maxie M. Berry, Lonnie C. Gary [sic; Gray], Norphlet P. Meekins, John A. Mackey and Maloyd L. Scarborough." Photo published in the *U. S. Coast Guard* magazine, Volume 2, No. 2, December, 1928, p. 24.



No official caption/date/photo number; photographer unknown.

The Pea Island Station as it appeared in circa 1942.



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The Pea Island Station as it appeared in circa 1942.



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